Cimex Lectularius

FAYE LEWIS

Whenever I see an exterminator company’s vehicle on the street I think what a boon such a service would have been to the settlers of the Rosebud Country of South Dakota. Mass exterminations were unknown in those days. They were an individual or a family matter, carried out painstakingly by hand. There were no discriminating sprays, that would destroy the parasite and leave the host in good health. Potato beetles had to be picked or shaken off each plant into a container and then disposed of, usually by burning; the horrendous tobacco worm that sometimes infested our tomato plants, too immense to be thought of as a mere larval form, was usually pried off the foliage with two sticks and then chopped to death with a hoe; the fleas on the hounds were usually a matter of canine endurance and survival.

Other exterminations imposed the added burden of secrecy. For these there was not the comfort of neighborly sympathy and counsel. Every family’s struggle was its own isolated warfare, a disheartening undercover battle without assistance from allies. For whom could one trust? We were all new people, shucked out of our backgrounds and set down in a strange country, stripped of the sheltering vestments of tradition. Face values were the only judgments our neighbors had to go by. Whatever reputations we had had for honesty, cleanliness, decency, were unknown here, and had to be built up anew, which takes time. We could not risk being pigeon-holed in the minds of strangers as “the family that has bedbugs.”

I wonder now that it did not occur to us sooner that if such a scourge could descend upon us out of this clean and virgin prairie, it could be descending likewise upon the rest of the settlers. But we were so stricken at first that it was a long time before we could lift our thoughts above our own humiliation and our frantic efforts to deal with it in a practical way. I think my mother’s first suspicion that we were not the only ones suffering this secret shame was aroused by a remark made by a visiting preacher who was also a homesteader. He had told us that he lived alone on his claim. “But,” he added cryptically, “if that shack of mine should ever burn down, there would be a terrible loss of life.”

There were agonizing speculations in family council as to the origin of this infestation. Mother said maybe they were in the prairie grass, but Father scoffed at this. She never saw any out there, did she? “In the lumber” was another suggested source, not given much credence. “If only I could have known something about them before we came, and had been on the lookout for them!” my mother reiterated over and over.

451
PRAIRIE Schooner

Years afterward, when the battle was over and the settlers could feel decent and complacent about it all, and could philosophize among themselves, I think they decided that the blame lay in old infested freight cars in which their goods had been shipped. If so, a blight on any of the officials of the Northwestern Railroad that were knowingly guilty!

Our family were probably the most severely afflicted of any of the settlers, owing to a piece of coincidental misfortune. We were unable to find water on the corner of the homestead on which we had erected our buildings, after the back-breaking digging of a well by hand, by men with spades. So all this dirt had to be shoveled back into the hole again, and another try made on another corner of the square quarter-section. A water vein was struck this time after a reasonable depth had been reached, providing a well adequate to the needs of family and stock. After this the buildings had to be moved to the convenience of the water supply.

During the moving of the house, several patches of plaster were knocked off the walls, which my father said he would fix late in the fall after the harvest was in. This was the busy season, during which all the long daylight hours must be spent in planting the crops. It seemed reasonable to all of us that repairs to the walls might wait until this rush was over. If they could be made in time to protect us from the cold of the winter, that would be soon enough.

Little did we know how admirably we were playing into the hands of a then unsuspected enemy! For by that time the genus Cimex probably had its colonization plans well organized, ready to take advantage of any break that offered itself; and here was a “break” in our plaster, like a mountain pass, making accessible to them fastnesses beyond the reach of any forces that could be brought to bear against them. So secure was this stronghold that they learned to depend upon no other shelter. And so unrelenting was my mother’s vigilance against them that the name Cimex lectularius was hardly descriptive of our particular visitation. They were, more strictly speaking, Cimex muralis.

The torturing awareness of their mass entrenchment behind this unassailable parallel we thought marked the end point of endurance for all of us. But upon my mother, at least, a few comparatively small bands of them were to inflict a still keener suffering. When she found that they had infiltrated the few pitiful treasures of our cultural life, she terrified us children by demanding of my father that he burn the house down.

It happened one rainy evening when we were wanting something new to read. Mother went to the book box in the living room, where books that were supposedly too old for us were kept until we should have grown into them. This evening she took out Scottish Chiefs. It was a tattered volume, that would have been considered worn out by any decent
library standards, having barely survived the reading appetite of her own childhood and that of her brothers and sisters. Many of the pages were loose, and the scraggly cover had been reinforced with a piece of oilcloth. I remember her smile of pleasant memory as she lifted it gently from the box, and the horror-stunned rigidity of her face as she peered beneath the back cover to adjust a wrinkle in the oilcloth. None of us asked what she had seen. We knew.

For a long time no one moved, or said anything. Mother sat in an attitude of chilled abstraction, the book still in her hands. Then she laid it quietly back in the box, arose, and took down a picture that hung on the living-room wall. It was a water color that my uncle had sent her as a wedding present, from Paris. We all cherished this picture. For us children, especially, it had a very romantic association, as this uncle was the only one of our family who had ever been to Paris. It was a pretty picture, too, a pleasant little autumn scene painted somewhere along the Left Bank.

The premonition that had led my mother to take down the picture told the rest of us what she would find when she looked under the edges of the paper pasted across the back. After one despairing glance she set the picture on the floor against the wall, threw herself into the Morris chair that stood beside the base burner, and gave way to the only attack of hysteria I ever knew her to have.

In this emergency my father, a calm and intelligent man, marshaled all his talents for logic and poise. He did not deny that my mother’s wild demand would destroy the enemy. “But a battle that is too extravagantly won is partly a defeat,” he said. “With planning, patience, and endurance they shall be routed with no major sacrifice on our part. And we shall set about their undoing soon.”

This simple and positive declaration by my father set things right for my mother very promptly. I think she had imagined, heretofore, that our scourge was sitting too lightly upon him; whereas he was only waiting for the optimum time to take action against it. That time came within a few weeks. After the last of the corn was picked we repaired our damaged walls, sealed off defective joinings in the woodwork, and wiped out the guerrilla bands of Cimex that were caught outside their lines.

The blockade held. By spring my mother was able to laugh a little over the whole affair.